

The Rambam Revolution

Handout



Lesson 1



From Moses to Moses: Discovering the Rambam

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Notes

Daily Rambam Study

Among Maimonides' many works was the *Yad Hachazakah*, a 14-volume compendium of the totality of Jewish law, culled from Torah, Talmud, Midrash and the other teachings of the rabbis who preceded him.

In 1984, the Rebbe instituted a daily study cycle, whereby the entire work (often simply referred to as "Rambam") is completed on a regular basis.

Those able, follow a three-chapter-per-day schedule, which completes the *Mishneh Torah* in slightly less than one year.

For those unable to study three chapters every day, the Rebbe suggested a parallel track at a more modest pace of one chapter daily, which lasts nearly three years.

For those who find even that too difficult, the Rebbe instituted yet a third track. Paralleling the three-chapter-per-day regimen by learning daily about the same commandments being studied there in detail, this one explores Maimonides' significantly shorter *Sefer Hamitzvot* ("Book of Commandments"), concluding all 613 mitzvahs each year.

The Giving of the Torah

On the day the Torah was given to the Jewish people, no physical item was presented to them. Rather they heard the 10 commandments being instructed to them. Moses then went up Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights and came back with the 2 tablets engraved with the 10 commandments. After breaking the tablets as a result of the sin of the golden calf, Moses went back up Mount Sinai for 2 sets of 40 days to ask for forgiveness for the Jewish people. On Yom Kippur Moses came down with the second set of Tablets and presented them to the Jewish people.

The First Torah Scroll

During the 40 years the Jews spent in the desert, Moses taught them all the details of the Torah that he himself had learnt from G-d. Moses began writing the first Torah scroll towards the end of the journey in the desert and it was completed shortly before his passing in the desert.

The Midrash says that Moses wrote 13 scrolls and gave one to each of the twelve tribes and placed the final in the Ark of the Tabernacle.

Written Torah

For the next 1000 years after the first Torah scroll was written, the 19 books of the Prophets and Writings were written, recording narratives of the various Prophets. The Men of the Great Assembly (Anshei Knesses Hagdolah), who led the Jewish people in the times of the second Temple, sealed the 5 books of Moses and the 19 books of the Prophets and writings as the Written Law.

Oral Tradition

The Oral tradition includes all that Moses learned from G-d by heart which he did not write down, but transmitted orally to his successors. It covers all the details and explanations of the Mitzvot presented in the five books of Moses. This tradition passed on from generation to generation.

From Moses until Rabbi Judah the Prince (Rabbenu Hakadosh) the traditional laws were thus learnt by heart and handed down from generation to generation orally. In the 3rd century CE, after the destruction of the second Temple, Rabbenu Hakadosh realized that because of growing hardships and persecutions the Jews might not be able to retain by memory all these traditional laws, so he decided to record them in what became known as the Mishnah.

The Talmud

The Mishnah was written very concisely, without much discussion or background information.

The Mishnah was studied, examined and interpreted in the great Yeshivot of Israel and Babylon for several centuries. Finally, in the 5th century, Rabbi Ashi, one of the greatest scholars of his time, realizing that the growing troubles and sufferings of the Jewish people might cause many of the laws and interpretations of the Mishnah which had been handed down traditionally for many generations, to be forgotten, decided to write them down.

Notes

Together with his contemporary, Ravina, and other heads of the Yeshivot in Babylon, they gathered and compiled the Talmud (or Gemarah) — the Babylonian Talmud, which Jews hold sacred and study to this very day. Some one hundred years earlier, the scholars of Israel had already compiled and arranged the Jerusalem Talmud, which — although not as authoritative as its Babylonian counterpart — is also held sacred and studied by scholars to this day.

Code of Jewish Law

Prior to Maimonides, in order to know Jewish law, one would have to learn the entire Talmud. And since the Talmud itself is at times indecisive, often incorporating conflicting opinions on Jewish law, it was necessary to then study the various commentaries, which clarified the final law. The famed Rabbi Yitzchak Alfasi, known as the Rif was the first to codify applicable Jewish law—as a commentary to the Talmud.

The difficulty was, however, that the Talmudic rulings – as well as the aforementioned commentaries – were not organized in a strictly encyclopedic, logical fashion, making research extremely taxing. For example, in order to study the laws of Shabbat by exploring the Talmud, one needs to search through tens of tractates.

Maimonides was the first one to index the entire body of Oral Law and compile it all in a logical and systematic fashion. The laws of Shabbat, for example, are all gathered in the third volume of Mishneh Torah in thirty chapters, each divided into bite-sized subsections.